

Are there Boltzmann brains in the vacuum?

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Abstract

“Boltzmann brains” are human brains that arise as thermal or quantum fluctuations and last at least long enough to think a few thoughts. In many scenarios involving universes of infinite size or duration, Boltzmann brains are infinitely more common than human beings who arise in the ordinary way. Thus we should expect to be Boltzmann brains, in contradiction to observation. We discuss here the question of whether Boltzmann brains can arise as quantum fluctuations in the vacuum. Such Boltzmann brains pose an even worse problem than those arising as fluctuations in the thermal state of an exponentially expanding universe. We give several arguments for and against inclusion of vacuum Boltzmann brains in the anthropic reference class, but find neither choice entirely satisfactory.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The basic idea of anthropic reasoning is that we should expect ourselves to be typical among some set of intelligent beings, called the reference class. This is codified, for example, in Vilenkin’s [1] “principle of mediocrity” or Bostrom’s [2] “self-sampling assumption”. As an example of this, we can take someone who just bought a lottery ticket. He should consider himself in equivalent circumstances to everyone else who has bought a ticket, assuming he has no inside information on the outcome of the draw. There are then two subgroups that he can be in, people with winning tickets and those with losing tickets, but there are a million members in the latter class and only one in the former. Thus, the person can assume that he is much more likely a member of the larger subgroup through anthropic reasoning.

While the precise specification of the reference class is a matter of considerable uncertainty, it seems clear that we should include all people subjectively indistinguishable from us [2]. After all, by assumption we have no way to know that we are not those people. For the purpose of this paper, this minimal reference class is sufficient.

To make things simple, let us assume that the universe is very large but finite in spatial extent. Let us suppose that the observed dark energy is in fact a cosmological constant. The accelerating expansion will then dilute away all the matter and radiation that fill the universe today, the universe will approach empty de Sitter space, and the state of that space will approach the Bunch-Davies [3] vacuum. In that state, it is possible for objects to nucleate. For example, an electron-positron pair can form spontaneously, separated by more than the horizon distance [4]. Similarly, it is also possible for a group of these particles to form together with their respective antiparticles so that the conservation laws are obeyed. With enough particles forming together in various configurations, it is possible to produce any physical object. In particular, it is possible for there to spontaneously appear a brain that is in exactly the state of your brain at this moment, and thus is apparently indistinguishable from you. The chance per unit space-time volume for such an object to appear is infinitesimal, but it is nonzero. Since the de Sitter phase will exist forever, the number of such “Boltzmann brains” [5, 6], will grow without bound, while the number of normal observers is finite. Thus by anthropic reasoning you should believe with probability 1 that you are one of the Boltzmann brains.

Of course, no one really believes that he is a Boltzmann brain. For one thing, to believe so would bring up the problem of skepticism in a severe form. Believing you were a Boltzmann brain would give you a strong reason to deny the existence of the external world. Hume’s answer to skepticism was that even though we cannot affirm the existence of the external world, in order to live from day to day we must act as though it really exists. But here, assuming the existence of a particular external world has led us to conclude that in fact the external world does not exist (at least in the form we appear to observe it). This is unacceptable because it prevents us from affirming the existence of the external world as Hume says we must. Thus by Hume’s analysis, we must reject any theory according to which we should be Boltzmann brains.

Furthermore, there is a simple test to see whether you are a Boltzmann brain. Wait 1 second and see if you still exist. Most Boltzmann brains are momentary fluctuations. So the prediction of the above argument is that you will vanish in the next second. When you don’t, you conclude that this argument has made a severely wrong prediction.¹

¹ If you are concerned with the fact that you could never observe your own ceasing to exist, you can change

What could be wrong? One possibility is that our assumption of a finite universe is not correct. But if the universe is infinitely large but homogeneous, and otherwise as specified above, the argument seems to be the same. In this case, there are infinitely many ordinary observers and infinitely many Boltzmann brains. But there seems to be a simple solution of computing the number of different kinds of observers who ever exist in a given comoving volume. As long as one takes a sufficiently large volume and does not choose it in a special way based on the existence of observers, the resulting density of observers will not depend on the choice of volume. Again this density is finite for ordinary observers but infinite for Boltzmann Brains.

Another possibility is that our universe will be short-lived, so that there will not be a long period of time during which Boltzmann brains could form. Using this argument, Page [7, 8] set several bounds on the future age of the universe, the most striking being that the universe would last less than 20 billion years.

To avoid such unfortunate conclusions, we can take advantage of the fact that compact objects such as Boltzmann brains aren't the only things that can nucleate in de Sitter space. There can also nucleate horizon-size inflating regions [9], which then go on to thermalize and produce ordinary observers (and also large new regions of de Sitter space in which more Boltzmann brains can form.) More generally, our universe may be part of a complex multiverse (formed, for example, in a string theory landscape [10]), in which new and different universes nucleate in inflating regions. To compute probabilities in any such case requires choosing a measure on the infinite and inhomogeneous spacetime. There is no agreement on the appropriate measure [11], but it seems possible that the correct measure will not give an unreasonable probability for us to be Boltzmann brains², so perhaps the solution to the paradox lies there.

But in addition to those that nucleate in de Sitter space, there is another kind of Boltzmann brain. Suppose that the dark energy is a dynamical field (such as quintessence) which will eventually decay away. In that case, the universe will become increasingly empty and will have at the end an infinite period of what is essentially Minkowski space in the vacuum state. In Minkowski space, nucleation is not possible, because of conservation of energy. However, it may still be possible for observers indistinguishable from us to arise as vacuum fluctuations in this infinite volume of Minkowski spacetime. Such observers will be the subject of this paper.

In one sense, the vacuum is just the vacuum, a pure state, and it contains no observers. But what happens if we consider not the entire spacetime but just the state of some particular region R at a given time. The situation is analogous to a system of two coupled harmonic oscillators in the ground state. The ground-state wavefunction of that system can be expressed in terms of eigenstates of the harmonic oscillators separately, as

$$|0\rangle = \sum_n a_n |n\rangle_1 \otimes |n\rangle_2 \quad (1)$$

where $|n\rangle_i$ denotes the n th excited state of oscillator i , and a_n is a numerical coefficient.

the argument to say that the theory that you are a Boltzmann brain predicts that your observations of the external world are coherent only by chance, and that subsequent observations will not remain coherent.

² In fact, this consideration is sometimes used as evidence of which measure is correct.

Similarly, one can write the vacuum of Minkowski space as a superposition

$$|0\rangle = \sum_{\alpha} a_{\alpha} |\alpha\rangle_R \otimes |\alpha\rangle_{\bar{R}} \quad (2)$$

The sum is over all possible states $|\alpha\rangle_R$ that could possibly be found inside R , with corresponding states found outside R . The factor a_{α} is some nonzero coefficient for each state.

This sum includes all states. In particular it includes states in which R contains a Boltzmann brain with all your present thoughts. If one interprets $|a_{\alpha}|^2$ as the probability that the region R contains an observer indistinguishable from you, one gets a different version of the Boltzmann brain paradox. Since the spacetime volume is infinite, there are infinitely many regions equivalent to R . As long as a_{α} corresponding to a brain is nonzero, there are infinitely many Boltzmann brain versions of you. In contrast to the de Sitter case, in the infinite Minkowski region one cannot have new universes appear, so that way out of the paradox is closed.

If one takes this problem seriously, perhaps one could conclude that the dark energy will never decay. But even then, this second type of Boltzmann brain still exists. The low-temperature Bunch-Davies vacuum of de Sitter space is locally very similar to the zero-temperature vacuum of Minkowski space, and the amplitude to have a Boltzmann brain in each space-time volume is essentially the same.

We can compare the probability (i.e., the $|a_{\alpha}|^2$) of a Boltzmann brain in the Minkowski space vacuum wave function with the chance of a Boltzmann brain nucleating in de Sitter space. The probability to nucleate a compact object³ in de Sitter space is given by [12]

$$p_{\text{dS}} \propto \exp\left(-\frac{2\pi M c^2}{\hbar H}\right), \quad (3)$$

where $H = \sqrt{(8\pi/3)G\rho_{\Lambda}}$ is the Hubble constant of de Sitter space, and c is the speed of light. Using an approximate value $M = 1$ kg, and the present dark energy density $\rho_{\Lambda} \sim 10^{-29}$ g/cm³, we get

$$p_{\text{dS}} \sim \exp(-10^{69}). \quad (4)$$

Considering the uncertainty about the exponent, there is no point in calculating the prefactor.

In contrast, Page [7] computes the probability of a brain in a specific sequence of states lasting for time t in a given region in the Minkowski vacuum state to be proportional to $\exp(-Mtc^2/\hbar)$, where M is the mass of the brain. Again using $M = 1$ kg, and $t = 0.1$ s, the “time to have a thought”, he finds probability

$$p_{\text{vac}} \sim \exp(-10^{50}). \quad (5)$$

Thus p_{vac} is enormously larger than p_{dS} . The ratio is $p_{\text{vac}}/p_{\text{dS}} = \exp(10^{69} - 10^{50}) \approx \exp(10^{69})$, i.e., $p_{\text{vac}}/p_{\text{dS}}$ is essentially indistinguishable from $1/p_{\text{dS}}$. An explanation of the

³ Here we neglect the entropy of the object, i.e., the fact that there are many possible brains with different microphysical states, even though they are indistinguishable at the level of thoughts. The nucleation rate should be multiplied by the number of such possibilities, but the correction to the huge exponent would be relatively tiny.

Boltzmann brain paradox in terms of the measure on the multiverse will have a harder time solving the problem if a Boltzmann brain production rate proportional to p_{vac} must be overcome than if we need overcome only an infinitesimally smaller rate depending on p_{ds} .

Thus it seems important to determine which kinds of Boltzmann brains should be considered as part of the reference class. One might try to argue that no Boltzmann brain should be considered, for example because in either case the objects are sectors of a pure-state wave function. But this does not seem feasible. Assuming the usual scenario of inflation is correct, our galaxy condensed from an early quantum fluctuation in the field driving inflation. Thus we ourselves are a sector of a pure-state wave function describing the inflating universe. Since we put ourselves in the reference class, it appears that arising from a quantum fluctuation is not a disqualification. If eternal inflation is correct, our whole universe was nucleated as a bubble in de Sitter space, and there is an even closer analogy to the nucleation of Boltzmann brains.

Vacuum fluctuations, however, are somewhat different. While nucleating objects can last forever, vacuum fluctuations in Minkowski space have a finite lifetime and can never decohere, since the vacuum wave function must remain pure. We shall discuss these issues below.

II. DELUDED BOLTZMANN BRAINS

In the simplest (and thus vastly most common) case, the Boltzmann brain is not part of a “Boltzmann universe” (the original idea of Boltzmann [13]) but rather exists on its own with a minimum amount of life support necessary to think a few thoughts. Thus if we are Boltzmann brains, all our past experiences are just an elaborate illusion with no connection to the external world. Thus our observations of the universe and our knowledge of physical laws are just delusions, and we have no real knowledge of anything outside ourselves. But it is just such knowledge of the supposed external world which has led us to formulate the Boltzmann brain paradox in the first place. If we abandon it, we will have no understanding of the real world and thus no possibility to understand the likelihood that we are Boltzmann brains.

So let us state the problem more carefully. Suppose, based on our observations, we come up with some theory, say “theory X” of physics and cosmology. We want to know whether theory X is correct, so we compare our observations with what it predicts. If theory X has a Boltzmann brain problem, then it predicts (usually with probability 1) that we are Boltzmann brains. The vast majority of Boltzmann brains do not have correct observations of the external world, so their observations would not be in accord with theory X, as ours are. Furthermore the great majority of Boltzmann brains would vanish immediately, as discussed above. Thus theory X leads to high-confidence predictions at odds with observation.

We do not in this analysis consider Boltzmann brains arising under some other theory Y but falsely believing they exist under theory X. Of course such Boltzmann brains could exist, but we have no way of meaningfully discussing them, because we have no way of knowing all possible theories Y that might have Boltzmann brains.

III. ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST VACUUM BOLTZMANN BRAINS

A. Turing test

Minkowski-space vacuum fluctuations are local, in the sense that, while consideration of the state restricted to a local region gives a nonzero amplitude for a Boltzmann brain, the state of the entire space is just the unchanging, pure vacuum. Thus it is not possible for a brain arising as a vacuum fluctuation to send out any durable signal of its existence. If it could, the global state would now consist (at least) of the vacuum plus the outgoing signal.

(Vacuum fluctuations in de Sitter space are very similar, except if the fluctuation or its effects extend across the de Sitter horizon. In that case, we have not the vacuum-fluctuation case that is analogous to Minkowski but the different case of nucleation, as discussed above.)

Thus a vacuum-fluctuation Boltzmann brain can never pass the “Turing test”. According to Turing [14], to determine whether something has human intelligence we should allow a human interrogator to ask it questions and see if its answers are indistinguishable from those of a real human. But the vacuum Boltzmann brain can never communicate with any external entity, so the test cannot be done [15].

More generally, the thoughts of a vacuum-fluctuation brain can never have any impact on anything. Thus if one believes that “a difference that makes no difference is no difference” (William James) then the existence of a vacuum Boltzmann brain can never matter for any purpose. These arguments appear to motivate the exclusion of vacuum-fluctuation brains from the reference class.

On the other hand, the same argument would apply to an ordinary observer enclosed in a perfectly sealed box (which we imagine here to be sealed even against gravitational waves). His thoughts could never affect anything outside the box. If we were sealed in such a box, especially without our knowledge, it seems very strange to declare that we should no longer be members of the reference class.

In fact, if we deny the reality of the vacuum-fluctuation brain, it appears that we are denying the famous argument of Descartes. A brain could be thinking “*cogito ergo sum*,” at least in the sense that the vacuum wave function is made up in part of a brain thinking that thought. But when we deny its reality, we say that this “Boltzmann Descartes” is wrong, at least to the extent that existence means membership in the reference class. This seems a powerful argument in favor of including vacuum-fluctuation brains in anthropic reasoning.

B. Decoherence

It is often argued that quantum mechanical decoherence produces the distinction between quantum and classical behavior. Decoherence means irreversible coupling to the environment. For example, if the electron in a two-slit experiment is permitted to interact with a bath of background photons, there will be no interference pattern. The quantum state of the electron necessary to produce interference is entangled with the photons and transported away from the apparatus. In principle one could track down these photons and recover the coherence and thus the interference pattern, but in practice that would not be possible. Decoherence explains why we never see people’s brains in superposition states, or cats in a superposition of live and dead.

Since a Minkowski vacuum fluctuation can never send out any durable signal, it can never be decoherent. This is different from the situation in de Sitter space. A nucleating brain in

de Sitter space can send out signals which travel outward forever, and can thus decohere in the usual way. Even though the entire de Sitter space might be in a pure quantum state, the existence of horizons allows for decoherence.

One could perhaps say that events that are not decoherent never actually take place [16], and thus that the “thoughts” of vacuum Boltzmann brain are not real thoughts. Or one could say that non-decoherent observers should never be counted in anthropic reasoning. This is similar to the idea of Gott [15] that Boltzmann brains should not be counted if they are observer-dependent, i.e., if one observer (here, one who looks only inside a given region) finds them to exist, while another (here, one who observes the entire Minkowski vacuum) does not.

Such strategies, however, have some unpalatable consequences. If we introduce into the vacuum a physical measuring apparatus that actually performs a measurement of the content of a certain region, it could potentially find a vacuum Boltzmann brain there. In this case, the Boltzmann brain would acquire decoherence and permanent existence through the process of measurement. (The measurement apparatus would have to be able to supply a sufficient amount of energy to allow the Boltzmann brain to exist without violating energy conservation.) The above arguments against the reality of this brain would no longer operate. However, the brain could have thought many thoughts before the time of measurement. Thus to go this route requires accepting the idea that the reality of the thoughts is not determined at the time of the thinking, but only later at the time of (possible) decoherence. On the other hand, perhaps this idea is no worse than the generally accepted idea that the reality of the spin of an electron pointing in a certain direction can be established only later when the spin is measured.

C. Reversibility

To gain some insight into the question of vacuum Boltzmann brains, we can imagine a computer that could exist as a vacuum fluctuation. It cannot send out any signal or interact with the external world. By analogy with a vacuum state, the quantum-mechanical states of the computer before and after its operation should be the same. Thus the computer cannot store any of the results of its operation.

These criteria correspond exactly to the operation of a reversible computer that is reversed. It starts in some initial state, performs some computation to end in a “final” state, and is then reversed to go backward from the final to the initial state, all while maintaining quantum coherence.

Such a computer could be put, for example, in one of the paths in a double slit experiment. An electron is incident on a plate with two slits. Through the lower slit, the electron travels unimpeded to a screen. Through the upper slit, the electron triggers a complex reversible computation. The reversible computer arrives at the final state and then returns to the initial state, eventually reproducing the electron with the same quantum state as it had originally. The electron then travels onto the same screen, where we see an interference pattern.⁴ The existence of the interference pattern guarantees that the computation is not decoherent.

⁴ We can put a delay in the lower path so that the electron arrives at the screen at the same time regardless of which way it goes.

One may now ask whether the computation was performed, was not performed, or was performed with 50% probability. Under normal circumstances, this question would be meaningless. Asking “was the computation performed?” is analogous to asking “which path did the electron take?”. It is not a meaningful question.

However, anthropic reasoning appears to have a “super power” to make the answers to otherwise meaningless questions matter. For example, suppose that we create 1000 boxes involving double-slit experiments and reversible computers, where the computation of the computers simulates the thinking of the human brain. Suppose we create, in addition, 10 ordinary computers that simulate human thought. Suppose you know that you are one of these 1010 computers.⁵ Now the question of whether the computation is really performed becomes relevant. If you think it is performed in every box, then you should think the odds of being in one of the double-slit experiments are 100:1. If you think it is performed in half the boxes, you should think 50:1, while if you think that it is never performed, or that a reversing computer never counts in anthropic calculations, you should think it certain that you are one of the ordinary computers.

One could perform a slightly different version of this experiment by stopping some of the computers at the reversal point and opening the boxes to permit decoherence. Perhaps these computers should be included in the reference class, even though the actually reversed ones should not. As discussed in the previous section, this idea has unpalatable consequences.

The reversal of the computers in this example has the strange property that the computers must “unthink” their thoughts to arrive back at the initial state. Such “unthinking” consists of stepping backward through the same sequence of states that represents thinking. If one considers the first half of the process as an observer in the reference class, one could consider the second half of the process as a time-reversed observer in the reference class. Thus it appears that vacuum Boltzmann brains have a 50% chance to be mistaken about the direction of time in the universe of which they are part. This follows, essentially, from the time-reversibility of the vacuum state.

IV. CONCLUSION

Boltzmann brains pose a problem for many theories of physics and cosmology. If Boltzmann brains found as vacuum fluctuations in Minkowski space (or fluctuations whose effects exist only within a de Sitter space horizon) are included in the reference class, the “Boltzmann brain problem” is even more severe. However, such Boltzmann brains have anomalous features: they can never be decoherent, they must be reversible, and they can never communicate with the outside world and thus cannot pass the Turing test. In fact, to a global observer, these brains do not exist at all: there is only the vacuum wave function. These features motivate the exclusion of Boltzmann brains from the reference class.

However, excluding vacuum-fluctuation Boltzmann brains from the reference class has its own unfortunate features. It appears that we cannot decide whether an observer is to be counted until we know whether he decoheres, which might not be until much later. Furthermore, one may argue that such exclusion violates the Cogito: we deny the existence

⁵ To sharpen the question, one could imagine that when you go to sleep tonight the entire state of your brain will be copied into each of these computers, and your organic body destroyed. Thus when you wake up, you will be one of the computers, but you don’t know which one.

of a brain that is thinking.

In the end, we can conclude only that a completely satisfactory explanation of the proper handling of Boltzmann brains arising as vacuum fluctuations is yet to be constructed.

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